

Reflecting on the Tensions Between Emic and Etic Perspectives in Life History Research: Lessons Learned

James L. Olive

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Abstract: I utilized a life history methodology in this study through which written and oral narratives were obtained from six postsecondary students who self-identified as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and/or Queer (LGBQ). Through this narrative process, I endeavored to understand how past events and behaviors shaped the participants' identities and their sense of resiliency. During the data analysis process, I experienced tension between etic and emic categories and themes. Consequently, I struggled to maintain an inductive position throughout the coding process. This article provides an overview of this process and seeks to add to the discussion regarding etic and emic perspectives in qualitative research.

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1. Introduction

The purpose of the original study which serves as the foundation for this article was to identify the key factors in a lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer (LGBQ) person's life history which enabled him or her to persist through higher education and successfully obtain an undergraduate degree (OLIVE, 2010). Identifying these factors was significant since many individuals within this marginalized group fail to complete a bachelor's degree. A life history methodology was deemed the best choice for this study because it not only effectively captures the lived experience of an individual, it also serves as a means through which to create identity by giving voice, in narrative form, to those who are marginalized and whose stories often go untold (TIERNEY, 2000). The production of identity for each participant in the original study was crucial as my desire was to highlight and challenge the oppressive aspects of higher education that may serve to

silence and marginalize one group of students simply on the basis of their sexuality. To that end, I utilized life history methods within a multiple case study and co-authored comprehensive accounts of the lived experiences of six students who self-identified as LGBTQ. The data I obtained were subsequently analyzed through a grounded theory approach and three themes were identified that spoke to the participants' academic success. [1]

I expected to learn a great deal from my participants through their life histories and the meanings they attached to past experiences. I did not, however, expect for portions of the process to be as personally challenging as they turned out to be. Specifically, during the data collection and analysis phases of my study, I experienced a significant amount of tension which originated from the insider (emic) perspectives of my participants and my own (etic) perspective on certain topics. What follows is a discussion on the life history method, the origins of the emic/etic perspectives and considerations related to those perspectives when conducting life history research, and how I dealt with the tensions that surfaced. [2]

2. Life History Research

In a life history approach, the researcher elicits written and/or oral narratives from an individual through which he or she describes and comments on his or her life in whole or part. Through this narrative process, the researcher attempts to understand how events and behaviors shaped the individual (BERTAUX, 1981; COLE, 2001; GOODSON, 2001; GOODSON & SIKES, 2001; HANDEL, 2000; KOURITZIN, 2000; LABAREE, 2006; TIERNEY, 2000). TIERNEY (2000) describes a life history as "a culturally produced artifact in one light and an interpretive document in another."¹ It might be defined by way of method (interviews and observations), theoretical vantage point (hermeneutics, phenomenology), or disciplinary perspective (psychology, anthropology, sociology)" (p.539). COLE (2001, p.126) has provided three defining purposes of life history research, which are:

1. to "advance understanding about the complex interactions between individuals' lives and the institutional and societal contexts in which they are lived";
2. to provide a voice to the experienced life of individuals, especially those voices that may be unheard, suppressed, or purposefully ignored;
3. to convey individuals' stories through their own words. In doing so, the reader is drawn into the interpretive process and "invited to make meaning and to form judgments based on an interpretation of the text as it is viewed through their own realities." [3]

When conducted in the appropriate manner, the life history method can serve to disrupt the commonly held beliefs which are widely considered to be "the truth" regarding a certain group of people (i.e., lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and queers)

¹ In other words, what is learned through a life history comes not only from the participant's retelling of his or her story but also from how the researcher chooses to analyze that story.

and will require that its readers recognize, acknowledge, and confront subjective perceptions and negative discourses which may serve to oppress those individuals (GOODSON, 2001). [4]

As mentioned above, the life history method has been frequently used as a means through which to create identity and give voice to those who may have been silenced due to oppression. For marginalized populations, the construction of identity is a crucial first step in the process of eliminating hegemonic systems of power. TIERNEY (2000) asserted that,

"[o]ne certainly cannot wish away power. But the work of life history ought to try to understand the conditions in which people live and work and die, so that everyone engaged in the life history—researcher, storyteller, reader—has the possibility of reconfiguring his or her life" (p.549). [5]

In this way, the life history method serves as a valuable tool for critical discourse. [6]

3. Etic and Emic Perspectives

3.1 Origins

Given the subjective nature of qualitative inquiry, emic and etic perspectives play a significant role in life history research. The terms "emic" and "etic" were first coined by the linguistic theoretician Kenneth PIKE in 1954 and were subsequently expanded upon in his book "Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structure of Human Behavior" (1967). PIKE derived the term "etic" from the suffix of the word phonetic which pertains to the study of sounds which are universally used in human language—specifically, the function of sounds within a language regardless of their meanings. Similarly, "emic" stems from the word phonemic which is primarily concerned with the acoustics, external properties, and meanings of words (BERRY, POORTINGA, SEGALL & DASEN, 1992; HELFRICH, 1999; YIN, 2010). Applied to the study of human behavior, PIKE's (1967) "etic viewpoint studies behavior as from outside of a particular system," while the "emic viewpoint results from studying behavior as from inside the system" (p.37). Soon after their introduction into linguistics, the anthropological theoretician Marvin HARRIS used "emic" and "etic" in his book "The Nature of Cultural Things" (1964). Being a cultural anthropologist, HARRIS' use of the terms differed not only in their application but also in how they were defined. He argued that instead of focusing upon the potential meanings and beliefs of the insider (emic) perspective of a particular group, what held more significance were the material (i.e., cultural, spiritual, political) causes for those meanings and beliefs. As such, HARRIS' cultural connotations for the terms differed from PIKE's in that an emic approach was defined as being more focused upon one culture, while an etic approach involved the comparison of two or more cultures as a means of identifying common characteristics. Following HARRIS' (1964) publication, a decades long debate ensued between PIKE and HARRIS centered upon the appropriate definition and use of the terms (HEADLAND, 1990). [7]

While emic and etic approaches to the understanding of social behavior were first seen in cultural anthropology studies (PIKE, 1967), the application of these divergent perspectives has grown and spans across numerous fields of study and genres of qualitative research. HEADLAND (1990) explained that "the terms diffused into other branches of science during the 1970s and at the same time became common words in the English language" (p.17). As the use of emics and etics became more prevalent, so did the confusion regarding their definitions and how their distinctions were applied. HEADLAND found in a review of literature that

"authors equate emic and etic with verbal versus nonverbal, or as subjective knowledge versus scientific knowledge, or as good versus bad, or as ideal behavior versus actual behavior, or as description versus theory, or as private versus public, or as ethnographic ... versus ethnological ..." (p.21), [8]

Due to the confusion surrounding these terms, I now provide a brief explanation of how "emic" and "etic" perspectives are frequently defined and utilized in educational research. [9]

3.2 The emic perspective

In educational research, the emic perspective typically represents the internal language and meanings of a defined culture (MERRIAM, 2009). The scope of said culture can be quite broad—for example, a researcher may study the culture of an entire school system or just one building or one particular classroom or a small group of individuals who share a common characteristic. Regardless of how a culture's scope is defined, "an emic perspective attempts to capture participants' indigenous meanings of real-world events" (YIN, 2010, p.11) and "looks at things through the eyes of members of the culture being studied" (WILLIS, 2007, p.100). [10]

While the value in both emic and etic perspectives has now been acknowledged, the emic is perceived by a number of educational scholars as being more relevant in the interpretation of a culture and in the understanding of cultural experiences within a particular group (GARCIA, 1992; GODINA & McCOY, 2000; SAVILLE-TROIKE, 1989). The basis behind the thought that the emic perspective is more relevant is that it is impossible to truly comprehend and appreciate the nuances of a particular culture unless one resides within that culture. An outsider's (etic) perspective can never fully capture what it really means to be part of the culture. [11]

3.3 The etic perspective

In contrast to its counterpart, the etic perspective encompasses an external view on a culture, language, meaning associations and real-world events. Most often, in social behavior research, the etic perspective is associated with that of the researcher since it comprises the "structures and criteria developed outside the culture as a framework for studying the culture" (WILLIS, 2007, p.100). When a researcher takes an etic approach to his or her study, he or she uses preexisting

theories, hypotheses, and perspectives as constructs to see if they apply to an alternate setting or culture. LETT (1990) defines etic constructs as "accounts, descriptions, and analyses expressed in terms of the conceptual schemes and categories regarded as meaningful and appropriate by the community of scientific observers" (p.130). The use of an etic perspective or approach to research is beneficial as it enables comparisons to be made across multiple cultures and populations which differ contextually. The comparison of differing cultures and populations enables researchers to develop broader cross cultural themes and concepts (MORRIS, LEUNG, AMES & LICKEL, 1999). [12]

3.4 Tensions between the emic and etic perspective

Within qualitative research, there are a number of methodologies which significantly favor the emic over the etic and *visa versa*. Regardless of the methodology being employed, many researchers of social behavior reside within the tension between the two extremes. Given the inescapable subjectivity that every researcher brings to a study through his or her past experiences, ideas and perspectives, a solely emic perspective is impossible to achieve. Conversely, if a researcher takes a purely etic perspective or approach to a study, he or she risks the possibility of overlooking the hidden nuances, meanings and concepts within a culture that can only be gleaned through interviews and observations. [13]

For years, the literature within anthropology was replete with debates about the value of emic versus etic perspectives (HEADLAND, PIKE & HARRIS, 1990; PELTO & PELTO, 1978). However, over time, both perspectives were deemed valuable in the study of social behavior (PATTON, 2010). In qualitative research, the divergence between emic and etic perspectives is now perceived to be an opportunity rather than a limitation. AGAR (2011) argued that, "etic and emic, the universal and the historical particular, are not separate kinds of understanding when one person makes sense of another. They are both part of any understanding" (p.39). In this way, the very differences themselves can prove fruitful as YIN (2010) has explained that "a common theme underlying many qualitative studies is to demonstrate how participants' perspectives may diverge dramatically from those held by outsiders" (p.13). [14]

However, as VIDICH and LYMAN (2000) explained, tensions still exist due to questions such as "By which values are observations to be guided?" and "How is it possible to understand the other when the other's values are not one's own?" (p.41). YIN (2010) argued that differences between emic and etic perspectives are always present due to the researcher's own value system which ultimately guides the design, execution, and reporting of a study. Personal characteristics such as age, gender, sexual orientation, race, and ethnicity can play a significant role in the divergence between emic and etic views on the same subject; even in cases where a real-world event is being described. YIN asserted,

"[t]he descriptive process cannot fully cover all the possible events that could have been observed at a field setting. Even the use of video or tape recordings of social

behavior ... have their basic parameters—where, when, and what to record—defined by the researcher" (p.12). [15]

Additionally, "the writer decides not only which particular events are significant, which are merely worthy of inclusion, which are absolutely essential, and how to order these events, but also what is counted as an 'event' in the first place" (EMERSON, 2001, p.48). [16]

Researchers of social and cultural behavior often use preexisting categories and schemas to analyze and report on their findings (MERRIAM, 2009). Consequently, selectivity may occur during the analysis of qualitative data, whether intentional or not, due to the preconceived categories and schema that a researcher employs to assign meaning (YIN, 2010). [17]

4. My Story

Maintaining a balance between emic and etic perspectives is crucial for the most accurate depiction of participants. Thus, as a qualitative researcher, my challenge was to do service to both perspectives throughout the course of my study. The impetus for my research on LGBTQ postsecondary students who successfully complete a bachelor's degree stemmed from my own personal experience. During my sophomore year in college, I had finally reached a point at which I was ready to reveal my homosexuality to my family and friends (also referred to as "coming out"). Unfortunately, upon doing so, the response I received from my family was far from positive and I experienced a great deal of emotional turmoil that same year as I struggled to rebound from a complete loss of my support system. Eventually, it became clear that I could no longer successfully manage my studies and I made the decision to drop out of college; it took me years to return and complete my undergraduate and master's degrees. When the time came for me to complete my dissertation, I knew that I wanted to gain a deeper understanding of what enables some LGBTQ students to succeed where others fail, and qualitative methodologies offered me with the best means by which to do so. [18]

As a new qualitative researcher, I naively believed that my own sexuality would greatly reduce the challenge of understanding my participants' experiences, as well as the meanings they assigned to those experiences. I thought that being gay would, in many ways, address (if not nullify) the emic versus etic dichotomy since I was a part of the very culture under study. What I failed to account for at the beginning of my study were the myriad sublevels that may exist within each culture and the fact that, like humans, cultures evolve with time. A discussion of every instance and its corresponding source of tension during my study is beyond the scope of the present article. Instead, what follows is a description of two primary examples in which I experienced a great deal of tension between the emic and etic perspectives, as well as a discussion centering on my own thoughts and what I learned through this journey. [19]

4.1 Just because we're related, doesn't mean we're alike ...

As I mentioned above, I initially thought that since I was a non-heterosexual, it would provide me with a greater foundation upon which to work with my participants. In reviewing various models of sexual identity development, I found that my own past experiences closely matched a majority of the models. In their analysis of such models, BILODEAU and RENN (2005) explain that, "the 1970s marked a new era in research regarding sexual orientation identity development with the emergence of theoretical stage models describing homosexual identity" (p.25). Each of these models endeavored to describe the process of one moving toward the acceptance of a non-heterosexual identity (see CASS, 1979; COLEMAN, 1982; HENCKEN & O'DOWD, 1977; LEE, 1977; McLELLAN, 1977; MILLER, 1978; PLUMMER, 1975; SCHAFER, 1976; SCHULTZ, 1976; TROIDEN, 1977; WEINBERG, 1977). Within lesbian and gay studies, three models are frequently cited: CASS (1979), TROIDEN (1977), and COLEMAN (1982). [20]

LIPKIN (1999) and, in a subsequent article, CASS (1984) both spoke of the "striking similarity" that existed among the themes of the earlier sexual-identity development models and most especially between the CASS, TROIDEN, and COLEMAN models. LIPKIN further stated that "although they differ in some details, [the CASS, TROIDEN, and COLEMAN models] have significant features in common: initial ambiguity, frequent questioning, disequilibrium, and information seeking" (1999, p.100). Due to the inherent similarity among the models, LIPKIN (1999) proposed an integration of the theories into a "mega-model" of sexual identity development which served as part of the theoretical framework for my earlier study (OLIVE, 2010). LIPKIN's mega-model consisted of five primary stages; these were: 1. *pre-sexuality* in which a preadolescent individual experiences nonsexual feelings of difference and marginality; 2. *identity questioning* wherein the individual experiences ambiguous, repressed, sexualized same-gender feelings and/or activities; 3. *coming out* during which the individual moves from toleration to acceptance of a non-heterosexual identity which is typically fostered through contact with gay/lesbian individuals and that culture; 4. *pride* wherein the individual integrates his or her non-heterosexuality into his or her concept of themselves; and lastly, 5. *post-sexuality* during which there is a diminishment in the centrality of homosexuality in one's self-concept and social relations. [21]

The development of my own sexuality was a textbook case of the stages outlined above. Shortly after I "came-out" to my friends and family, I experienced a tremendous amount of pride in the fact that I was not heterosexual. Having lived for last 18+ years believing that I was fundamentally flawed and destined for hell (my family were fundamentalist Christians), when I realized that there were not only others like me, but an entire culture in which I could find support and acceptance, words could not express my joy and relief. If asked, my friends would tell you that I was probably one of the gayest gay guys they knew during the summer of 1992—rainbow stickers adorned nearly every surface that I could reach (a slight exaggeration, but not by much). In time, as the above models

suggested, I have transitioned into a post-sexuality phase in my life wherein my family and occupation are now far more prominent than is the fact I am gay. [22]

When I began interviewing the participants in my original study, I noticed that a majority of their experiences deviated greatly from the preexisting models in regard to one stage—pride. As I have explained in greater detail (OLIVE, 2012), five of the six young individuals in my study never experienced what could clearly be defined as a stage of pride, nor had they gone through a period of time during which they experienced an "us versus them" mentality toward heterosexuals. One of the young women in the study explained,

"I never really experienced [a] 'gay pride' I feel like I've never been, like, only everything gay ... I've never just hung out with just gay people, or done just gay things. 'Cause, I do so many other things and have felt accepted by my friends pretty much" (p.255). [23]

Another one of the participants suggested that the absence of a pride phase was probably due to the fact that today's younger people do not see being non-heterosexual as that "big of a deal." This young man said that most of the responses he received from peers about his sexuality were "Oh, you're gay. Who cares?" [24]

In listening to my participants' comments, I realized that while I may be part of the culture that I was studying and thus—in some aspects—my participants and I were related, it did not mean that we experienced the same "rites of passage." That is to say, what I initially considered to be my emic understanding of sexual identity development, in fact, turned out to be an etic perspective, which was erroneously placed upon the young people I was studying. This realization produced a significant amount of tension for me both personally and as a researcher. The personal tension I felt was due to the realization that if younger LGBTQ individuals are growing up in a more accepting world and, consequently, no longer feel a desire or need to fully connect with and immerse themselves in the LGBTQ culture, it is quite possible that certain aspects of what it means to be LGBTQ could be lost. Follow-up discussions with these participants made it clear that they did not share the same level of admiration or respect for various LGBTQ traditions (i.e., annual gay pride events); nor did they feel a strong need to learn about LGBTQ history. As a "seasoned" gay man, I was saddened by this discovery. [25]

Prior to beginning my study, I knew that the acceptance of LGBTQ individuals by society had witnessed a notable increase; however, I had failed to appreciate the impact of those societal changes. The realization that the coming out process had changed so significantly for younger LGBTQ individuals underscored the salience of more recent postmodern views on sexual identity development. As a scholar and researcher, I experienced tension due to the fact that, in some ways, I was sent back to the proverbial drawing board in order to adequately capture, understand, and convey the coming out processes of my participants. Having

considered myself so close to the topic of my study, learning how far I was from the mark was a humbling experience. [26]

4.2 Endeavoring to comprehend the incomprehensible ...

Another source of great tension during my investigation on the resilience of LGBTQ postsecondary students stemmed from the fact that I am male and some of my participants were female. During my interviews with the three young women in my study, unprompted, two revealed that they had "personal experience" with the topic of date rape and one plainly stated that she had been date raped during her freshmen year of college. As one might expect, this information was not only surprising, but also extremely disturbing to someone who possessed minimal knowledge on the pervasiveness of rape. Through subsequent conversations with these young women, I began to recognize how widespread this issue was at the postsecondary level. The tension I felt between my male (etic) perspective and the female (emic) perspectives of my participants was twofold. [27]

Several questions were raised from this discovery. As a researcher, I questioned whether to put the information into my final product considering that it did not relate to the primary topic under study. If I chose not to include the information, would I not be silencing their voice and doing them a disservice? Considering the amount of trust these women had placed in me, I did not feel comfortable with this option. However, if I did include this component of their stories, I questioned how much of the information should be divulged. As a male researcher and on a personal level, I felt extremely ill-equipped to fully comprehend what this horrendous type of experience must feel like. [28]

5. Addressing Tensions Between the Emic and Etic

For a qualitative researcher, "the challenge is to do justice to both perspectives during and after fieldwork and to be clear with one's self and one's audience how this tension is managed" (PATTON, 2010, p.268). There are a number of techniques which can be used to address the tensions that may arise between emic and etic perspectives. At the forefront of these approaches are collaborative or participatory research wherein participants function as co-researchers in the design of a study and in the collection and analysis of the data obtained. PATTON states that, "while the findings from such a participatory process may be useful, a supplementary agenda is often to increase participants' sense of being in control of, deliberative about, and reflective on their own lives and situations" (p.269). As such, a participatory approach to the data analysis process can be especially useful in studies dealing with marginalized populations. [29]

RYLE's (1949) notion of "thick description" is another approach that can be used to lessen the gap between emic and etic perspectives. The use of thick, rich and deep descriptions, as well as the use of participants' own words serve not only to reduce a researcher's selectivity by heightening his or her awareness of preconceived categories, it also limits the level of subjectivity that a researcher may introduce into the data analysis process (PATTON, 2010; YIN, 2010). [30]

YIN (2010) argued that, regardless of the steps taken to address differences between the emic and etic,

"researchers cannot in the final analysis avoid their own research lens in rendering reality. Thus, the goal is to acknowledge that multiple interpretations may exist and to be sure that as much as possible is done to prevent a researcher from inadvertently imposing her or his own (etic) interpretation onto a participant's (emic) interpretation" (p.12). [31]

In my case, I endeavored to balance the emic and etic perspectives not only through the methods discussed above, but also through the use of intense member-checking and rigorous peer debriefing. [32]

From the outset of my data analysis process, I solicited my participants' assistance in the identification of categories and themes. Not only did I share interview transcripts and all of my notes with each person, I also worked with each of them to fully construct life stories which captured their experiences as clearly as possible and through the construction of these life stories, the participants and I worked collaboratively to identify the meaning attached to their statements. Bringing the participants in as, to some extent, co-researchers enabled me to not only validate the themes that I suspected were present in the data, but also increased my understanding of each person's unique journey. At the conclusion of the project, all of the participants stated that, in some form, the process of analyzing their data was cathartic and deeply beneficial. [33]

Given what I perceived to be my male ineptitude in relation to the topic of rape, I not only worked closely with the female participants in the study, I also solicited the help of three female colleagues. These women represented a wide range of ages, lengths of tenure, a variety of ethnicities and different sexual orientations. I called upon these women many times during the interviews, the data analysis process, and the final writing stages of my project. This peer debriefing process was beneficial not only to my study, but also to me as a researcher in a number of ways and our discussions helped to shape the final product of my study. [34]

Given the uniquely subjective nature of all human experience, I find value in YIN's (2010) assertion that the divergence between insider and outsider views will always be present. However, as qualitative researchers, we owe it to our participants to strive for as near a perfect balance as is possible between the emic and etic perspectives. [35]

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Author

Dr. James L. OLIVE is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Leadership Studies at Ashland University. Dr. OLIVE received his Ph.D. from The University of Dayton where he completed a qualitative investigation into the familial and collegiate backgrounds and cultures of persistent LGBTQ college students. His research areas of interest include the support of marginalized student groups, as well as the intellectual and identity development of postsecondary students.

Contact:

James L. Olive

Department of Leadership Studies
Ashland University
401 College Ave
226 Dwight Schar College of Education
Ashland, OH 44805, USA

Tel.: ++1 614-285-5466

E-mail: jolive@ashland.edu

URL: <http://www1.ashland.edu/coe/faculty-staff/dr-james-l-olive>

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